

Challenging Estates and Estates Challenges

By Sue Holmes

Association of University Directors of Estates (AUDE)

Change is the only constant, and no matter how we plan for tomorrow and strive for quality, flexibility, and a little headroom in our estates, the challenge changes rather than being achieved. This applies to educational facilities in the United Kingdom as much as it does elsewhere in the world.

The UK estate sector size is just over 20 million square metres of gross non-residential space, with a further 6 million square metres of gross wholly owned residential in a sector worth over £73bn to the UK economy. Home undergraduate student

numbers are steady in an increasingly competitive sector with more intensive research and more and growing external benchmarks. We have seen a reduction in postgraduate and international applications. Staff salaries make recruitment a challenge in a number of areas of the UK across a number of work areas.

We saw over £2.5bn invested in non-residential estates projects in 2013-14, with almost 80 percent of the estate reported in excellent or very good condition. There has been an increase in the number of refurbishment projects rather than a focus on just new build.

We also see that students learn differently and have fewer boundaries and a more imaginative, integrated, and open approach to formal and informal learning. Expectations start at, or before, open

day and only increase. We all aim to be the student's "university of choice," with more of us focusing resources on recruiting.

We aim to provide all of our students (and staff) with an excellent experience and high-quality facilities and services. We know from a recent AUDE report that 77 percent of students say that facilities play a role in their university choice, with the only factor marginally more important reported as the course itself.

Amongst the current sector challenges and conflicts we are working with an 8 percent drop in fees, whilst wages, services, products, and utility costs have all risen at a higher rate. Demographics show that the number of 18 year olds will decrease until 2030—creating a smaller pool of home students. Quite how many international students are put off by visa requirements and the politics within the EU is not clear.

The reality for UK's estate and facilities directors is the need to deliver a sustainable estate within an environment of increasing revenue and capital costs. Our day jobs are becoming more complex, and we are required to juggle expectations and manage costs. That must sound familiar to most.

Driven by the need to demonstrate efficiency and effectiveness, we need to scrutinise our total property costs and compare our own data with other public data. In the last year, although our 40 percent reduction target to 2020 is looking very challenging, we know that carbon emissions were down by 8 percent from the previous year. This has been a real estate success story—innovation and development to make savings, improve environmental sustainability, and help meet carbon targets. However, energy costs have increased per kWh, and a proportion of staff and students are calling for more control of more natural environments.

As a sector we geekily analyse positive trends in energy efficiency—looking to see what works best



Photos are of the John Henry Brookes Building at Oxford Brookes University.

and where we can improve. As a sector we do trial new technologies as well as approved and tested solutions and share our feedback, both positive and negative, and champion reuse and retrofit. Buildings are being built for a 40- to 50-year life, creating more challenges with usually higher development costs.

Another AUDE development in the last year has been the Green Scorecard; a system that will allow us to demonstrate more effectively the choices we make on a daily basis on elements such as carbon emissions, utility costs, transport, waste biodiversity, or procurement, with each of us able to set realistic, albeit stretching, targets that fit into other business requirements and still demonstrate improvements. If we develop a large research area that is power hungry, what matters is that the research adds value and the energy is as green as we can make it, not that we are simply using more power. We think about whole life costing—how long does equipment last, what is the cost of maintenance, is Product A more reliable and easier to maintain than Product B?

Who of us hasn't tripped over students' charging devices from cleaner's sockets on corridors? I've been challenged by my own senior colleagues on how I reduce usage of utilities. I could fully control environments to reduce usage, but that reduces personal choice. It's not an easy or comfortable choice.

Space is an emotive subject, and we may reduce space by better design, using space guidelines, creating more shared office spaces, or looking at how we increase income per square metre. We need spaces to be adaptable with a long life/loose fit approach as we see spaces being used 24x7 (with the wellbeing and security challenges that may bring) and development of additional spaces for social learning or flipped teaching. Somehow the older designed spaces don't disappear.

Some universities make better use of office spaces by sharing with commercial partners or developing more shared spaces between departments or staff who would not have historically shared. The community of research often leads the way on this, but if we want to maintain single offices we need to generate an income to support this model. Universities with shared office spaces often release additional funding to improve other elements such as materials, additional staff, or research time. Whilst we value our differences, there are examples that will help many of us be more efficient and effective by using some variations of the developments we see.

AUDE is developing a database of good practice that will allow colleagues to look at financial savings,

but linked to development of opportunities, service improvement, or cost reductions. We hope this database will illustrate good practice to government and allow us to continue to learn from each other.

We continue to see strong demand for residences provided either in house or via external partners. Again, there is great variation in the sector. Some universities are able to manage all needs through partners, and others are restricted by planning and



land values. Students want quality, value, and convenience. The private sector is less well regulated.

Many of us manage facilities such as soft FM, catering, conferencing, shops, commercial leases, sports, and transport. These need a different set of skills and require that the role of director of estates and facilities management is varied and challenging. Is that why I love it? ☺

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